Guide Tone Comping

BRET WILLMOTT

AN OVER-EAGER ACCOM-panist who tries to impress a soloist with "hip" tension-filled voicings is asking for trouble. Such voicings often prevent the soloist from establishing a specific scale or melodic idea. Not a good strategy for keeping a gig.

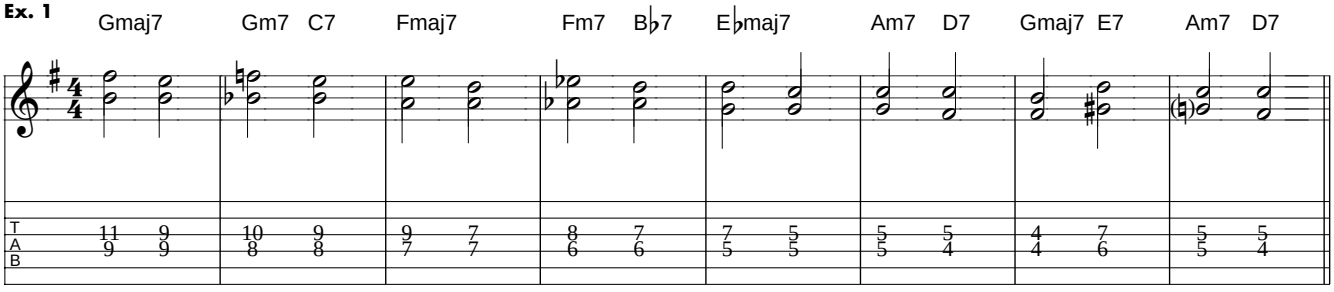
To avoid this debacle, try a less-is-more approach. Play the guide tones—the chord's two most important notes. Guide tones are generally the 3 and 7 (or 6) of a given chord. Fig. 1 lists the guide tones for basic 7th and 6th chords. Note: When the 5 is altered, it often functions as a guide tone.

Try playing guide tones on the inside four string groups: 2+3, 3+4 and 4+5. For both sound and range, 3+4 is my personal favorite. Examples 1 and 2 show guide tones applied to a common chord progression. Ex. 1 presents the naked guide tones that are rhythmically and melodically embellished in Ex. 2.

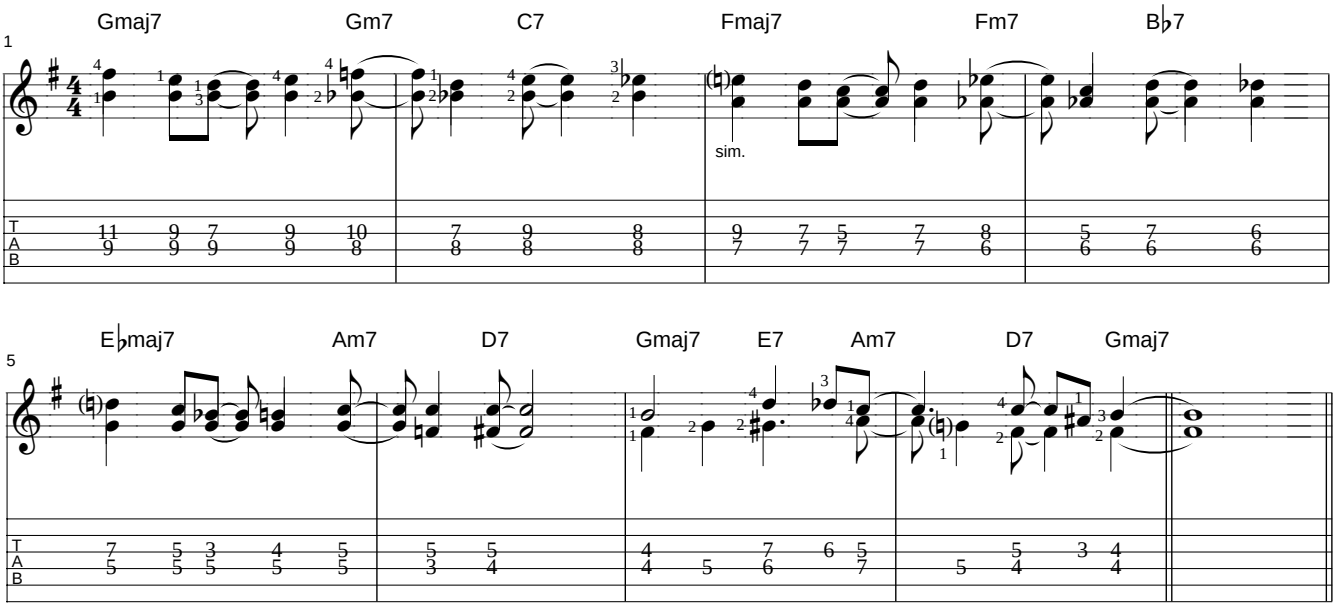
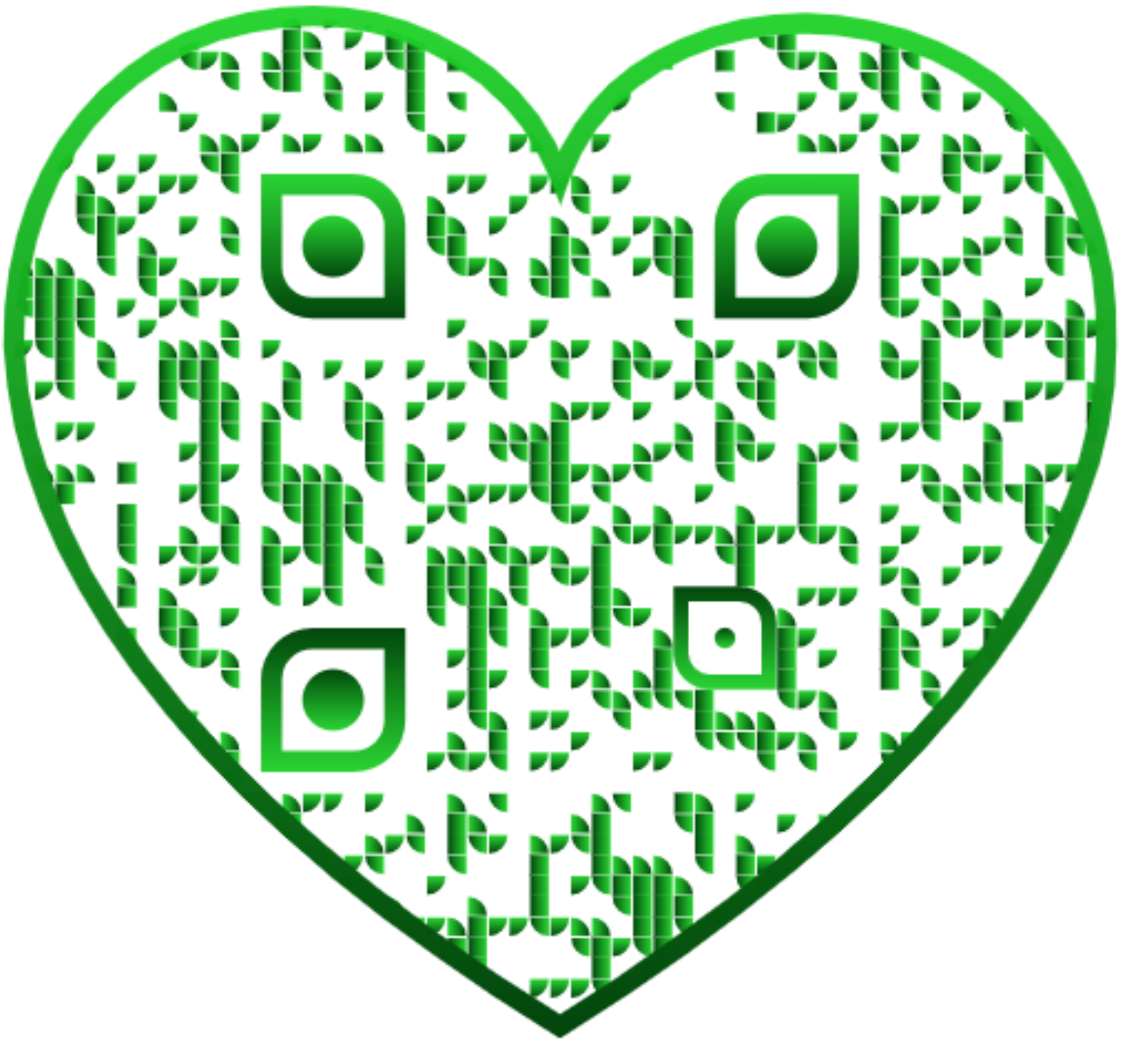
Fig. 1

chord type	guide tones		
major 7	3	7	
major 6	3	6	
minor 7	♭3	♭7	
minor/major 7	♭3	7	
minor 6	♭3	6	
dominant 7	3	♭7	
dominant 7 (sus 4)	4	♭7	
minor 7 (♭5)	♭3	♭7	♭5
diminished 7	♭3	♭♭7 (6)	♭5

Ex. 1



Ex. 2



"Most of my technical inroads came from trying to learn banjo."—Leo Kottke, Aug. '77 *GP*